

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

Luke 18:9-14

Verses 9-12

**He told this parable to those who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and were despising others. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing there, was praying these things to himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like the rest, robbers, unjust, adulterers or also like this tax-collector. I fast twice during the Sabbath and tithe everything I acquire.’**

The last reference to a locality was in 17:1, in the border area between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and after this parable, Jericho is mentioned (18:35), just north of Jerusalem.

Occasions for a parable against spiritual pride arose throughout the Lord's ministry. Some spoke about Pilate murdering Galileans (13:1) and were clearly smug. Many protested about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, viewing traditions and ceremonial aspects of the law as a way to create legal and moral superiority (6:2; 13:14; 14:3) and the status of certain people as 'sinners' (included here, despised trades, the immoral, Gentiles, Samaritans, the afflicted and the poor) as a way to exalt themselves above others. Note Jesus' parables about the lost coin, lost sheep and lost sons (15), the good Samaritan (10:25-37), and Lazarus and the rich man (16:19-31), the parable of the workers (Matt 20:1-16), all dealing with a person's true standing before God.

This standing before God literally occurs in the parable; the Pharisee, was **standing there** σταθεις in the temple courtyard, that is, he was standing in the presence of God. The apostle Paul spoke of being careful about standing (1Corinthians 10:12). Human beings overlook what is happening closest to them, in their own hearts. Standing has its partner in the expression, **trusted in themselves**. Self-righteousness, or to use a Pauline term, self-justification was anathema to Jesus. Trusting in one's own spiritual, moral, goodness (**righteous** δίκαιοι) is the starting point for all religious systems, including secular ones. Moral outrage, so prevalent in our present times, is the surest sign of people constructing a system to exalt themselves as the virtuous and holding others with great contempt, that is, **despising others**. It is the old ladder system at work: find a way to put yourself above others then one can become morally and spiritually superior and find a basis on which you can build a personal divinity and bargain with God to enter into his glory.

Jesus used **two men who went up to the temple to pray**, and people went up because the temple was elevated on Mount Zion. The two persons were at polar opposites, one admired by all, a **Pharisee** and looked upon as a true example of legal perfection and ardent piety. The other was a member of the despised class of sinners, considered a thief and traitor; a **tax-collector**. In fact, he admitted so. Not only a thief and traitor, but unclean because he worked with Gentile Romans.

**The Pharisee was praying these things to himself** πρὸς εαυτόν, often translated as, stood apart by himself. While this rendering portrays his prideful aloofness and malice towards the tax-collector, it does not indicate that the Pharisee was not appealing to God in the end, was not moving the Lord by his petitions, but was alone with his own self-worship and self-deification – **he was praying to himself**. His enumeration of three faults were general in nature, though many have applied to the tax-collector, for apostasy was considered spiritual adultery.

However, the Pharisee was saying the truth: he was not a **robber, nor unjust, and not an adulterer**. He was also acknowledging God for this goodness by praying, **God, I thank you**. Likewise, **he fasted twice during the Sabbath and tithed everything he acquired**. Fasting was only required on the Day of Atonement according to the law but the Pharisee went beyond this requirement and fasted twice during the week, literally translated here as **the Sabbath**. He also went beyond tithing his earnings, but like a GST, tithed all he purchased with his income. These actions were truly sacrificial

and revealed a sincere dedication to God. And yet, it was not a legitimate prayer and his religious accomplishments, in the end, were not only valueless but damning.

Verses 13, 14

**But the tax collector stood at a distance not even wishing to lift his eyes to heaven but struck his chest saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man, rather than the other, went down to his home justified. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but he who humbles himself will be exalted."**

The sorrow of the tax-collector is seen in his body: **he stood at a distance not even wishing to lift his eyes to heaven but struck his chest.** Unlike the Pharisee, his standing was not one of pride or arrogance before God. He stood sorrowfully in the presence of his Lord. He made sure he took the lowest place in the courtyard, refusing to raise his eyes but remained with his head lowered and then beat his chest repeatedly, accusing himself before God.

His prayer was short, unlike the longer prayer of the Pharisee: **God, be merciful to me a sinner.** In the Greek it is only six words. He tells the truth too, that he is a sinner. Both men spoke the truth about themselves. One thanked the Lord, one begged the Lord. One had done many sacrificial things and avoided wrong. The other had greedily amassed his possessions, not sharing them as the Pharisee had done. He had repeatedly hurt his fellow Jews and betrayed his faith and allegiance to God.

The difference is in the heart, for as Christ said, **everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but he who humbles himself will be exalted.** God, who can weigh up motives and see inside a person, was able to identify where a person stood: the tax collector needed God and could only fall back on his mercy. The Pharisee didn't need God to save him because his actions were what he thought would exalt himself. Ezekiel prophesied that the king of Judah (Zedekiah) would have to remove his crown because **the lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low** (21:26). Christ is advocating that before God there should be a hatred of sin and of what a person has become in his nature and life. This is true repentance and true humbling.

At the conclusion of the parable, Christ revealed God's heart. The tax-collector understood his sin correctly, unlike the Pharisee who exalted himself before God. He then appealed to God's love: **be merciful** ἰλάσθητι. The verb, which is a passive imperative requiring a dative, literally means, be propitiated to me. In the active, it means to expiate sins, as in Heb 2:17. Of course, the tax-collector had nothing to offer God to propitiate himself. All he could do was to fall back on the grace and generosity of God that would lead him to be merciful and forgive.

**I tell you, this man, rather than the other, went down to his home justified.** This is the climax of the parable. Jesus picks up Ezekiel's thinking when he argues that a man who has all his life done evil turns to the Lord and repents, such a man is received back into covenantal grace (33:12-16) but the person who has done the will of the Lord but then trusts in his righteousness and does evil, will be condemned by God. **Justified** δεδικαιωμένος, literally to make righteous, is not frequently used in the gospels, although the concept is there in Jesus' many acts of divine forgiveness, association with outcasts and sinners and the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-27), the parables of the lost sheep, coin and son (Lk 15) et al. Clearly, Jesus' work amongst prostitutes, the unclean and sinners is beautifully highlighted in this parable for those considered first. Those who appear to be the great followers of God are put last and the truly repentant are fully accepted by God and considered righteous in his sight because of their trust in God's generosity in Christ (Matt 21:31b). But he is also striking at the law, or rather, the use of the law to gain credit with God. Here he graphically reveals that those attempting to gain favour with God through works of the law are condemned but those who acknowledge their true need and rely on the goodness and kindness of God in Christ, are in a right relationship with him. See Rom 3:24 et al; Gal 2:16 et al; Tit 3:7).

